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ABSTRACT

Noting that parents are their children's first and most important teachers, this digest provides suggestions and recommends resources to help parents become involved in their children's literacy development. The digest discusses visiting the public library; reading aloud and modeling reading; playing with children; listening to children read; having book conversations with children; and helping children write. The digest also presents a sampling of free or inexpensive materials that parents can send for. (RS)

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Children's Literacy Development: Suggestions for Parent Involvement

by Eleanor C. Macfarlane

Parents are a child's first and most influential teachers! But how do you as a parent go about finding the information you need to do a good job at such an important task? Which organizations will be the most helpful? What resources are available to help you fulfill this important responsibility? Here is a quick digest of ideas and resources to get you started.

Visit Your Local Library

First of all, your local public library is one of your best—and least expensive—resources. Libraries, even small ones, have shelves of books for parents and children. Consult a librarian if you do not find the materials you're looking for, or aren't sure what's available. The librarian may be willing to order some of the resources listed in this *Digest* or tell you how to obtain them through inter-library loan. Your school library and nearby college library are other possible sources of information.

Reading Aloud and Modeling Reading

Reading aloud to your children, and letting them see you reading, are two of the best ways to help them on the road to literacy. It's never too early to start! Two particularly useful books, which have been popular for many years and are probably available in your local library, are *The New Read-Aloud Handbook*, by Jim Trelease (2nd rev. ed., 1989, Penguin Books) and *A Parent's Guide to Children's Reading*, by Nancy Larrick (5th ed., 1982, Bantam Books).

As Barbara Bush wrote recently, "Above all, children love to be read to. It is a special time for them to be close to the grown-ups who care for them, and a wonderful way to feel loved." (Bush, 1993)

Many books for both children and adults are available in a "read-along" format using audio cassettes. These are often available in your public library and may be especially useful in the car or when you and your child would like to listen together to a tape while following along in the book.

Eleanor Macfarlane is an Associate Director of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication and the Family Literacy Center. She presents workshops on family involvement.

Playing with Your Children

Small children generally learn best while playing, rather than by being "instructed." Knowing this, you can involve your child in lots of day-to-day activities and conversations that will help develop her/his literacy. You can talk to the child while playing, about whatever is of interest to you both. Nursery rhymes and songs are fun to learn and say or sing together.

Ordinary daily activities can also be an occasion for learning. For example, recognizing commercial signs and logos while out walking or driving is one of the first steps in learning to read. A simple trip to the grocery store is more fun if you talk with your child about the things you're seeing and doing—when he's little, about colors and shapes; later on, about the many places from which grocery items come; when he's older, about box sizes and unit costs and the nutritional value of items in the store.

Listening to Your Children Read

Once a child learns to read, she needs lots of practice. The more the better! The old saying about "practice makes perfect" applies to reading as well as to most other activities. If a child has frequent opportunities to read aloud to a willing listener—often a parent or grandparent or a sibling—she is more likely to become a fluent reader. Most children enjoy reading every other page with an adult—you read the first page, she reads the second, and so forth. With an older child, you might each read a chapter.

You may want to help your child get "over the hump" of starting a new book by offering to read the first few chapters aloud at bedtime (or alternate pages with your child). When you finish, you may hear, "Do you mind if I read the next chapter by myself before I go to sleep?" and you will know you have succeeded in your endeavor.

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Having Book Conversations with Your Child

Sharing may take place in many ways—book conversations, journals, drawing, and improvisational drama. Participants in the Parents Sharing Books program developed by the Family Literacy Center at Indiana University program have found that the amount of reading by children in the program increases markedly. They also report, as an added benefit, a dramatic im-provement in family communication. Parents may be interested in a book describing this program. The book is called *Connect! How to Get Your Kids to Talk to You*. It is available from the Family Literacy Center for $14.95.

Helping Your Children Write

With a little encouragement, your children's reading and writing development will proceed on parallel tracks. Even a very young child who sees the adults in her life writing letters and grocery lists and telephone messages will want to try writing also (Baghban, 1989). At first, to an adult, the efforts look like scribbles, but before long your child will be trying to communicate with pictures and words. Encourage her efforts. Before long, sending letters and stories to grandparents or to some other relative can be a reason for writing.

Materials for Parents—A Sampling

Little Beginnings: Starting Your Child on a Lifetime of Learning. The First Five Years, 1992. 21 pp. National Association of Elementary School Principals, Alexandria, VA. Booklet for new parents, with separate sections focusing on specific activities that contribute to early childhood development and well-being at various stages in the child's life. Available from: World Book Educational Products, Station 14/Digest, 101 Northwest Point Boulevard, Elk Grove Village, IL 60007-1019. (Single copy free with self-addressed, stamped business-size envelope or call 1-800-621-8202 and mention this *Digest*.)

The Little Things Make a Big Difference: How to Help Your Children Succeed in School, 1991. 19 pp. National Association of Elementary School Principals, Alexandria, VA. Booklet for parents of school-aged children with tips for supporting their children's learning and development and for undertaking family activities that can help children succeed in school. Available from: World Book Educational Products, Station 14/Digest, 101 Northwest Point Boulevard, Elk Grove Village, IL 60007-1019. (Single copy free with self-addressed, stamped business-size envelope) or call 1-800-621-8202 and mention this *Digest*.) A companion videotape is available from NAESP (1615 Duke St., Alexandria, VA 22314-3483) $19.95 + $2.50 shipping.)

Let's Educate Together. The Road to Literacy Series: Book One for African American Parents with Children. *A Black Parent's Guide to Laying the Foundation for their Children's Educational Success*, by Sheila Venson, 1990. 31 pp. Alternative School Network, Chicago, IL. This booklet provides suggestions to African-American parents who want to provide their children with a firm foundation for educational success. Available from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service, MF01/PC02 plus postage. Call 1-800-443-ERIC to order. [ED 337 552]

Queridos Padres: En Los Estados Unidos...La Escuela es Nuestra Tambien, by Siobhan Nicolau and Carmen Lydia Ramos, 1990. 25 pp. [English version: *Dear Parents: In the United States...It's Our School Too*, 1990, 25pp.] Available from: Hispanic Policy Development Project, Inc., New York, NY, $ .25/copy. Ask for a list of other publications in Spanish and English.

The Family Literacy Center and the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication, both located at Indiana University, 2805 E. 10th Street, suite 150, Bloomington, IN 47408 (1-800-759-4723) can provide more information about free and inexpensive materials for parents. You may also wish to contact the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, University of Illinois, 805 West Pennsylvania Avenue, Urbana, IL 61801-4897 (1-800-583-4135).

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